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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet discusses approaches that have been found helpful to workers in dealing with disaster-related stress. It suggests interventions that may be helpful before, during, and after a disaster. Predisaster interventions are discussed. These include collaborative relationship between emergency and mental health services, orientation and training, and predisaster personal emergency preparedness plans. Suggestions for management of stress during a disaster operation are provided, including developing a "buddy" system, supporting coworkers, humor, and eating small amounts frequently. Suggestions for workers in the first hours, days, and weeks following a disaster are also given. These include attending a debriefing, eating well and getting adequate sleep, talking about feelings, and using relaxation and stress management techniques. These topics relevant to returning home following disaster work are discussed: rest, pace, discussing the disaster, emotional reactions, children, and growth. (ABL)

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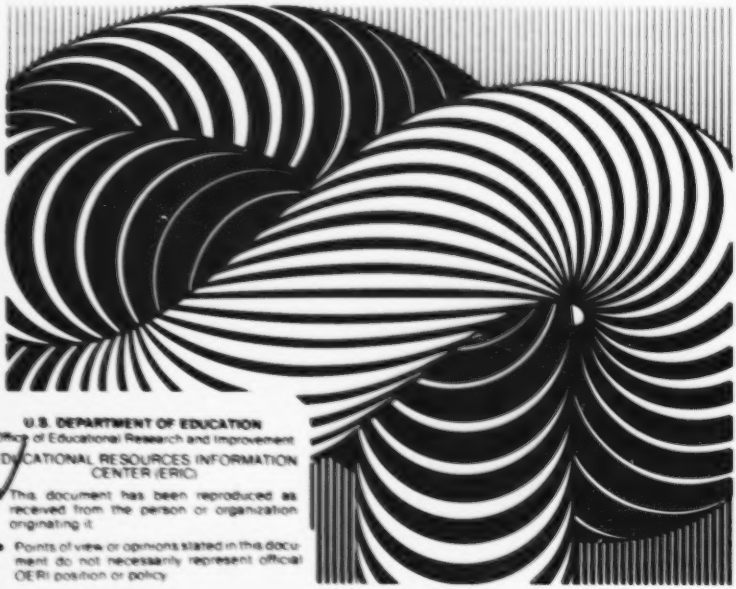
National Institute of Mental Health

Prevention and Control of Stress Among Emergency Workers

A Pamphlet for Workers



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Prevention and Control of Stress Among Emergency Workers

A Pamphlet for Workers

Prepared by
Division of Education and Service Systems Liaison
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This pamphlet discusses approaches that have been found helpful to workers in dealing with disaster-related stress. It suggests interventions that may be helpful before, during, and after a disaster.

The suggestions presented here are guidelines. No single suggestion will work for all people at all times. However, these ideas are based on a wealth of experience and wisdom from disaster workers.

Predisaster Interventions: Prevention

Some of the most important stress management interventions for disaster workers take place predisaster. These activities are important in preparing workers for what they will likely encounter in the disaster situation. Preparation can help minimize the effects of stress when it occurs and can help individuals cope with stress in a more efficient manner. The following are some useful predisaster interventions.

Collaborative Relationship Between Emergency and Mental Health Services

A predisaster collaborative relationship can make training available for emergency workers in the mental health aspects of their work, so that they can anticipate and effectively deal with their own mental health needs and those of victims. Such predisaster planning between mental health and emergency services also paves the way for effective collaboration during and after a disaster.

This pamphlet is adapted from: National Institute of Mental Health. *Disaster Work and Mental Health: Prevention and Control of Stress Among Workers*, by Hartsough, D. and Myers, D. DHHS Pub. No. (ADM)85-1422. Washington, D.C.: Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1985. The section "Returning Home Following Disaster Work" is by Brian Flynn of the National Institute of Mental Health.

Orientation and Training

Training on the mental health aspects of emergency workers' jobs, both routine and during disasters, should be provided as part of workers' initial on-the-job orientation and ongoing service training. Such education can prepare workers for the stresses they may experience in their work, decrease their vulnerability, and increase their effectiveness in dealing with job-related stresses when they occur.

Predisaster Personal Emergency Preparedness Plans

Having a personal and family emergency plan will help individuals to cope with whatever emergencies may occur while they are at home. Every emergency worker should be familiar with hazards and potential emergencies inherent in the local geographic area, and should have contingency plans for self and family. This is important not only to the safety of the family but also to the availability of the worker for disaster assignment. The more quickly things can be taken care of at home, the more quickly the worker can report to work relatively free of family worries. Similarly, if the worker is at work when a disaster occurs, peace of mind and concentration will be enhanced if the person's family is prepared and able to cope.

Every family emergency plan should include the following:

- A home inspection to identify hazards and eliminate them
- A plan for different types of emergencies that might occur in the area, such as tornado, hurricane, earthquake, or hazardous materials spill; training for what to do before, during, and after each emergency
- A home fire safety plan, including smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, and preplanned escape routes
- An evacuation plan: what to take, where to go, where to meet or reunite
- A plan to care for children, individuals needing assistance (the ill or those with disabilities), and pets
- Training of every capable family member in how to turn off utilities and in first aid
- Prominent posting of emergency phone numbers

Emergency supplies and equipment should include the following:

- Food and water for 72 hours; include special diets, infant

formula, and pet food

- Portable radio, flashlight, and batteries
- An adequate supply of prescription medications, prescription eyeglasses, extra batteries for hearing aid, etc.
- First aid kit
- Blankets or sleeping bags
- Sanitation supplies
- Fire extinguisher
- Sanitation and personal hygiene supplies
- Alternate lighting: camping lantern, candles, matches
- Safety equipment: hose for firefighting, heavy shoes and gloves, work clothes
- Tools
- Cooking supplies: charcoal, Sterno, camp stove

It is a good idea to establish a mutual aid system within the neighborhood. With a bit of preplanning, neighbors can arrange to look out for and assist one another in times of emergency, pooling supplies as well as skills. Many neighborhoods develop emergency preparedness plans as part of the Neighborhood Crime Alert network. Such a mutual aid arrangement can give emergency workers increased peace of mind about their families' welfare.

In addition, every worker who is likely to be called out on emergency assignment on short notice is wise to have an emergency bag prepacked. Supplies should be tailored to the nature of the worker's usual type of assignment. If the assignment is likely to entail any length of time away from home, the bag should include the following:

- Clothes, including sturdy shoes and clothes for inclement weather
- Eyeglasses and medications (including over-the-counter remedies for personal stress reactions—antacids, aspirin, antidiarrhea medicine, etc.)
- Personal hygiene supplies
- Paper and pens
- Forms or supplies necessary to the worker's disaster assignment
- Sleeping bag
- Cash and important identification, including official identification to allow access into restricted areas
- Change for pay phones (these circuits usually work when other phone lines are out of service)
- A picture of one's family and at least one comforting object from home
- A good book, a deck of cards, crossword puzzles

Excellent materials on home emergency preparedness and emergencies specific to a given geographic location are available at local chapters of the American Red Cross, local Offices of Emergency Services, or the regional office of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Interventions During The Disaster

The following are suggestions for workers for management of stress during a disaster operation.

1. Develop a "buddy" system with a coworker. Agree to keep an eye on each other's functioning, fatigue level, and stress symptoms. Tell the buddy how to know when you are getting stressed ("If I start doing so-and-so, tell me to take a break"). Make a pact with the buddy to take a break when he or she suggests it, if the situation and command officers allow.
2. *Encourage* and *support* coworkers. Listen to each other's feelings. Don't take anger too personally. Hold criticism unless it's essential. Tell each other "You're doing great" and "Good job." Give each other a touch or pat on the back. Bring each other a snack or something to drink.
3. Try to get some activity and exercise.
4. Try to eat frequently, in small quantities.
5. Humor can break the tension and provide relief. Use it with care, however; people are highly suggestible in disaster situations, and victims or coworkers can take things personally and be hurt if they are the brunt of "disaster humor."
6. Use positive "self-talk," such as "I'm doing fine" and "I'm using the skills I've been trained to use."
7. Take deep breaths, hold them, then blow out forcefully.
8. Take breaks if effectiveness is diminishing, or if asked to do so by commanding officer or supervisor.
9. On long assignments away from home, remember the following:.
   - Try to make your living accommodations as personal, comfortable, and homey as possible. Unpack bags and put out pictures of loved ones.
   - Make new friends. Let off steam with coworkers.
   - Get enough sleep.
   - Enjoy some recreation away from the disaster scene.

- Remember things that were relaxing at home and try to do them now; take a hot bath or shower, if possible; read a good book; go for a run; listen to music.
- Stay in touch with people at home. Write or call often. Send pictures. Have family visit if at all possible and appropriate.
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol.
- Keep a journal; this will make a great story for grandchildren.

Interventions After The Disaster

The following suggestions may be useful for workers in the first hours, days, and weeks following a disaster.

1. *"Defusing."* This may happen quite spontaneously, or may be an organized staff meeting immediately following an incident or operation. It is an informal debriefing in which personnel can begin to talk about their thoughts and feelings about the incident. It may happen over coffee or cleaning of equipment. The key is to keep the tone positive and supportive. Workers should not be criticized for how they feel or how they functioned. Team members and leaders should check on each other's well-being and provide support to those who seem to be hardest hit by the incident.
2. Attend a debriefing if one is offered; try to get one organized if it is not offered.
3. Talk about feelings as they arise, and listen to each other's feelings.
4. When listening, try to keep war stories to a minimum. It doesn't really help to hear that once-upon-a-time someone went through something worse; it doesn't help to hear "it could have been worse, so quit your complaining."
5. Don't take anger too personally. Anger is a normal feeling after a traumatic event, and it sometimes gets vented at coworkers inadvertently.
6. Recognition is important; coworkers should receive appreciation and positive feedback for a job well done.
7. Eat well and try to get adequate sleep in the days following the event.
8. Relaxation and stress management techniques are helpful.
9. Maintaining a normal routine and "taking care of business" help maintain a sense of order and accomplishment.

Returning Home Following Disaster Work

Until recently, little attention has been paid to the emotional issues faced by those who work on site following disasters. Homecomings in particular are frequently not as pleasant and rewarding as the worker had hoped and planned. Following are some ideas and suggestions for workers when thinking about and planning for going home.

Rest

- Few workers get enough rest while working on a disaster and are usually exhausted when they return home. It's very important to catch up on rest, and this may take several days.
- The need for rest may cause family problems. The family may want and need the worker's attention, time, and energy. Their needs must be considered, so try to anticipate the problem and negotiate your respective needs carefully.

Pace

- Disaster work is usually fast paced. You may find it difficult to gear down to a normal pace. You might find yourself rushing through tasks, moving quickly to additional tasks, or feeling guilty when you are not actively engaged in something.
- Try to be tolerant of others who are moving at a slower pace — they are usually going at a normal pace! Resist the temptation to see others as lazy, uncommitted, or slow.
- Before returning, try to anticipate the areas in which problems concerning pace might come up (both at home and at work). Thinking through situations where problems might develop will help you prepare for the actual situation.

Discussing the Disaster

- You may want to talk a lot about your disaster experience. Others may be interested, *but* anticipate that:
  - others may not be interested.
  - while they may be interested, they have not gone through the experience and may not feel as intensely as you.
  - others may want to tell you what has been happening to them during your absence. Be tolerant and understanding.

What they have been through is as important to them as your experiences are to you.

- Remember that just because people seem uninterested in hearing about the *disaster*, they aren't uninterested in *you*. The disaster has been so much a part of your life for the last few days and weeks that you may be preoccupied with your experience when you return home. While others will be concerned about your well-being, they may have little interest in your disaster experience.

- You may *not* want to talk a lot about your disaster experience, especially if the experience was particularly difficult for you or if you are very fatigued. Help those around you understand that you are still processing or recovering from your experience and are not ready to talk yet. You may want to reassure them that this is not an effort to exclude them but that you just need some time.
- Understand that you may alternate between wanting and not wanting to talk about your disaster experience. This switching may be disconcerting because you may not be able to predict or control these shifts. You probably heard the same thing from victims who were afraid because they could not control their emotions. Over time these shifts will become less frequent and surprising. Understand, and help those around you understand, that this is a normal and natural response.

Emotional Reactions

Most workers, upon returning home, have emotional reactions that surprise and sometimes frighten them. If you can anticipate some of these emotions, you can manage them better. Following are some examples.

- Disappointment often results when expectations about returning home don't match the reception. You may have anticipated happy reunions with family and colleagues only to find them angry because of your absence. Try to keep reunion expectations realistic.
- Workers sometimes experience frustration and conflict when their needs are inconsistent with the needs of family and colleagues. You often hear of the disaster worker who returns

home after weeks of eating hotel food, desperately wanting a home-cooked meal, only to find a spouse who can't wait to go out for dinner!

- You may become angry when you are exposed to people's problems that seem minor or even trivial compared to what you have seen at the disaster site. This may happen reading the paper, watching television, or talking with family and friends. It is important to remember that you can easily hurt people by minimizing their concerns and problems.
- Most workers have been introduced to the concept of "victim identification." You have a strong emotional response to some victims because, in some way, they remind you of yourself or someone important to you. The flip side of the same concept often occurs when you return home. That is, friends and family members (children, spouse, parents, etc.) may remind you of disaster victims you have seen. This may produce intense emotional reactions that not only surprise you but surprise and confuse the unwitting recipient of these emotions. Help others understand this phenomenon.
- Mood swings are common upon return home. You may change frequently from happy to sad, tense to relaxed, outgoing to quiet, etc. These mood swings are normal and natural. They are part of the process by which you resolve conflicting and contradictory feelings. As time passes these mood swings will become less dramatic, less frequent, and less surprising.

Children

Dealing with children upon returning home deserves some special note. It is important to give children information in ways that help increase their understanding and do not confuse or frighten them. Help young children understand why you were away and what you did. Think in advance about the kind of information they might want and the level of detail you should provide. It is usually not advisable to provide dramatic stories or graphic details of damage that might frighten children and generate fears of their own vulnerability as well as yours. If you have collected newspaper pictures and stories, you may want to share them with older children. Don't forget to encourage children to talk about what happened in their lives

during your absence. They will find your interest reassuring.

Growth

The days and weeks following the return home from working on a disaster provide good opportunities for introspection. You've seen stress, disruption, and destruction. You've seen people at their strongest and at their most vulnerable. You have worked under difficult and stressful circumstances. You've been pulled away, for a variety of motives, from your day-to-day life, worked and lived in strange surroundings, and returned home again. You have undoubtedly gone through some personal growth. To help understand how you may have changed, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you learned anything that can help you grow?
- What was rewarding about the experience?
- What have you learned about your own abilities?
- What have you learned about other people?
- Are there things you would like to do differently in the future?

Supplementary Materials

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